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The Advancements

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The porter had been entrusted with an unimportant secret. By the time he found me on the bow he had told his story so many times — the sum of the secret being that there was a polar bear on the ice — it had become a dead thing in his mind. And so he spoke a series of superlatives in a mechanical voice, oblivious to my efforts to cut him short with, "Yes, I've heard," and "It's common knowledge." One of the first people he spoke to that morning, an oiler, had already given me the details, complete with the appropriate emphasis when describing the danger.

The facts were simple: the ship we were on, an oil tanker loaded with bunker, had less than three feet of freeboard above the ice that froze us in its grip. If the polar bear were hungry it could easily climb on board in search of food. We had no gun.

I figure the captain was being clever. He wanted the crew to be aware of the danger — only because he was an incorrigible gossip — but he didn't want to answer to their fears. So he told the porter his bit of intelligence knowing that before lunch everyone would be informed but in no way able to confront him with their knowledge. It was a secret.

When the porter asked, "Did you see it?" I could honestly reply that I had not looked.There was nothing to see.

There was nothing to see on our horizon but two colours dominating nothing — nothing but white sky on ice. A rectangle of red directly ahead was an icebreaker. For three unproductive days it had tried to escort our ship (a patch of yellow to them) into Corner Brook, but the ice would not budge. Beyond the red lay a swath of dark green which was the Newfoundland coastline. It had an accidental appearance. We were too far away to discern any particular feature such as an individual tree or rock. The distance revealed only a shade and a shape — a shape like a body that had suddenly slumped over dead in the water and been left in that position awaiting positive identification.

I had gone up to the bow to search for markers on the ice. Three days earlier, I'd tossed nails out of a porthole on the stern and was using them to chart our advancement, nails being the engineering equivalent of breadcrumbs. So I knew that for two days we remained motionless in spite

of the captain's commands on the telegraph and the strain of the ship's steam turbines.The nails had stayed clumped in the same spot, relative to the position of the ship, until this morning when I looked and found them missing. 'Progress,' I hoped, then with a grim thought walked forward and spotted a glint of metal twenty-five feet ahead of the bow. The ice had pushed the ship back six hundred feet. In all likelihood, the ice breaker had retreated with us.

I said, "*Mais, pourquois*?" which was the password to a series of dark thoughts, and the porter who followed said, "You heard about that too?" This time his voice had emotion. He sounded angry and afraid.

"I hear it every time I eat," I said. "Philpot thinks it's hysterically funny, but what can you expect from a captain who never leaves his ship?"

The porter agreed. "He doesn't want to go home to the woman he hates. He'd rather be here with the twenty men who hate him. Some choice."

It was true. The captain had no living relatives beyond a wife he despised so thoroughly he remained married to her solely out of a spirit of vindictiveness. He didn't push the punishment so far as to be willing to go home and spend an hour in the same room with her. With the ship laid up the previous winter due to a lack of contracts, Captain Philpot had urged the company to allow him to stay aboard as a ship's keeper, in a final bid stating that he would work without wages, but they declined his offer.

Never mind what you hear about a sailor's love of the sea. It may be true of fishermen, but Philpot was the only merchant mariner I ever met who would rather be on the ocean than in port.

Yesterday he'd said, "*Mais, pourquoi*?" for the first time at breakfast, and then broken into a cynical laugh. Addressing the first mate, he said: "You heard that. Over and over on the ship to shore: 'Pourquoi! *Pourquoi! Pourquoi!*'" The first mate returned a polite, political smile that was defeated by gravity when Philpot turned his back. "Did you hear about the wheelsman on the icebreaker?" the captain called across the room to the engineers' table where I sat between the second and the fourth. "He's having a domestic problem in the middle of an icefield!"

"Is he," the second returned in a voice that wasn't necessarily insubordinate. Everyone hated Philpot.

"It seems his girlfriend in Montreal is leaving him for another man," the captain said expansively. "He called her up last night to tell her he's paying off when the ship lands in Corner Brook, and she dropped the bomb. Idiot! Should have known better than to call home when he's at sea. When you're gone three months, what do you expect?

"All night they were at it. '*Pourquoi? Pourquoi? Pouquoi?*' I felt

like cutting in and telling him, 'She's found someone who's better in bed, that's why.' Anyone would be better than someone who's not there. And he's trying to convince her to wait till he gets home while he's stuck on the ice? We're not going anywhere. If that doesn't drive him crazy..." Philpot fumbled for an expression with his hands but couldn't grab one.

"Never call home. You're either at sea or on shore. You can't be in two places at the same time." He stabbed a fork into his breakfast and silenced himself with a mouthful of food.

I glanced at the faces around me: all expressions of disgust. Everyone was in the same boat except for our captain. We, the crew, were stuck in the ice.

For twenty-four hours, outside events reflected my mood. Somewhere in that whiteness, perfectly camouflaged, stalked a natural predator. Somewhere within was a terrible fear of a relentless idea. I was well into the second month of a three-month stint at sea, and the division between my personality, anything that made me separate, and that of the other individuals on the ship had become indistinct. It was blurred by repetition ... repetition of tasks and hours ... conversations and base instincts. We were all self-imprisoned hostages who had come to rationalize the position of our kidnapper. And our kidnapper was inside of us, prodding us prisoners into the same activities, sitting us down at the same table where we got to know each other too, too well — until after two months of it I wasn't sure I knew the difference between myself and anyone else. I could not declare what it was. Never mind the fingerprints: we were just different shapes and ages with the same theme at our cores. What makes anyone unique? Is it anything he wouldn't be indicted for?

And I worried about that wheelsman on the icebreaker. His mind was in Montreal and at sea. What would happen if he convinced himself that nature had taken sides? that somehow the smothering ice was an act of betrayal? I thought about that man, saw only the similarity in our predicaments, and I shrank, feeling how unspeakably alone we were for being the same.

And I thought about the polar bear. And I did not believe it was looking for me. I hoped my wheelsman believed the same thing.

The next day the nails were gone, but that told me nothing. I could not gauge the direction in which we had moved. And Philpot was in his glory at breakfast with his *Pourquoi! Pourquoi! Pourquoi's!* It seemed the wheelsman on the icebreaker had spent the majority of another tortured night calling ship-to-shore on the radio. The girlfriend's answer, according to the captain, was an unequivocal, "*Je ne sais pas.*" She didn't know why she didn't love him, couldn't think of anything he might change that would

make her love him. Would she wait? She could only return his question: "*Pourquoi?*"

"*Parce que, je t'adore.*"

"*Je ne vous aimez pas.*"

"Give it up," said Philpot. "Be a man. That's what I'd tell him if he were in my crew."

The porter, who was taking the fourth's order, looked at me with an expression that said, 'At least he's lucky in that regard. Whatever hell he is in, he's not here."

This is a strange coincidence. I had attended the same high school with the porter, although I didn't really know him at the time — I only knew *of* him. Everybody did. He went by the name "California" because he sold drugs. California had been one of the most popular people in school. Now he had the lowest position on the ship, making beds, serving food, and washing dishes, but he didn't feel cheated by life.

We had never spoken as teenagers, so it seemed strange that the porter considered me his best friend based on our history. We'd had nothing in common then except an institution from which he had dropped out. Now we had a mutual employer. Our ambitions had led us to career advancements in opposite directions, but he was right. There was no one I was closer to on the ship. Perhaps listening to California's nostalgia provided me with a tangible demonstration of the differences in people.

Philpot's conversation killed the relief of these thoughts. There was something all too visible in the responses on the faces around me to the captain's dissertation. How well we understood the wheelman's plight! Our lives were stranded in the same proportion to his — even California's.

The captain said: "My French isn't good, but I think he's threatening suicide. That's sure to impress her," he laughed.

The mate mercifully interjected, "Have you heard anything else about the polar bear?"

Philpot scowled. "Loose lips sink ships. You'll have everyone in a panic if you start talking like that.

"No, there's nothing new. But I'll see you in my office after breakfast," he said, probably inventing a punishment to suit the crime. "What are you winking at?" he demanded from California, but the porter assured him there was something in his eye then winced to prove his pain. The captain was satisfied with the porter's discomfort.

At lunch we learned that the wheelsman on the icebreaker had disappeared.

I met the day man on the engine room stairs as I went down to

stand the twelve-to-four. He was the greybeard on our staff, a thirty-year-old from Cape Breton whose body didn't seem to know that it was young. As if in acknowledgement of his Methuselah status in the engine room, his face was weathered and his spine was bent. His eyes had an unattractive look of preparation, as though he were always preparing for the worst and formulating the necessary words to stave it off. He'd been nicknamed "Gandalf" by my oiler. "He's not just some drooling deadbeat who talks to himself because no one else will listen," the oiler assured me. "He's working on spells."

On the stairs the day man greeted me with his usual salutation. "Any news?"

"The wheelsman on the icebreaker is missing."

That didn't seem to surprise him. He shrugged and said: "How long?"

"Has he been missing? They're not sure. When the watchman called him for the morning shift, he wasn't in his cabin. They've been searching their ship."

"How do you know?"

"They called Philpot to see if he's here. You don't think he's walked ashore?" A cruel irony of our present circumstance was that it was certainly possible given the thickness of the ice.

The day man rubbed his chin, perused the catalogue of his experience and said:

"No, he's dead." Then he walked up the engine room stairs.

The main engines had been silent all morning. The captain wasn't going to waste any more fuel until he saw signs of progress from his guide ship or he'd soon be burning his cargo. The engines were stopped on the icebreaker, too. To prepare me for what to expect on my shift, the fourth said, "There's nothing going on," saluted and left. When the oiler grabbed the clipboard, said, "Rounds," and disappeared into the boiler room, I felt the sudden solitude painfully.

Nothing in my vision was alive. The turbines on the generators still revolved at blinding speed, but they did not breathe. The Bailey charts recorded flat lines. No heartbeat. No voice.

But listen, I have heard the voice before. It will sound crazy unless you can imagine yourself stepping into a boiler plant, godless and alone.

In every engine room there is a perpetual mechanical whirring, a babbling, a pounding and puffing cacophony of sound that rages and subsides to meet distant, unspoken demands. And if you walk among the noises that reverberate from the crooked piping and the yellow, oil-stained

bulkheads you may come to a particular point where the sounds intersect at a specific frequency — perhaps the chance result of someone opening a tap in the forward end of the ship, or the cook inspecting the fridge. And you will hear, for the briefest of moments, what you'd swear was not a noise at all but the sound of a single, human voice.

It has no words; it is just an effect. All you will hear is a human syllable shouted with the dreadful emotion of a forgotten man — a labourer, you might imagine, who started the machines that continued to run long after his stopped — whose sole purpose in death is to be remembered. How many times when I stood alone at the throttles or in the dim darkness between the condensers or beside the stern tube watching the ocean slowly leak into the hull through the loose packing have I heard the voice ... and shuddered? Because the voice has only emotion, and emotion alone is futile. It has not the power to speak its own name.

The oiler, emerging from the lower engine room, said his favourite word. "Coffee?" It is possible that this is not the first word he spoke as a child but, as an adult, it was the one he said most often.

"Show me the log."

"Why? There's nothing going on," he said as though in defense of coffee. The only gauge moving is that one." He jerked a thumb at the clock.

It was true.

So we were both startled when, without warning, the telegraph rang "FULL ASTERN."

We had been on ship's articles together for long enough to work in utter harmony, like two separate bodies with the same mind. The oiler grabbed the throttles, and I dodged into the boiler room to adjust the fuel pumps, then hurried down the stairs to increase the discharge of the feed water pump. The hiss of steam entering the turbines as the oiler spun the astern throttle open made a cutting sound like a piece of paper being torn in two, only amplified till the sound was nearly deafening. The shaft turned quickly and the hull first trembled from the effort then began to shudder and shake. The ice had no desire to relinquish its grip.

When I returned to the main deck, I went into the soundproof telephone booth and called the wheelhouse in a spirit of complaint. "Why weren't we warned?"

"Philpot," replied the second mate in a hushed voice that implied the captain was on the bridge so he could not apologize. He himself would have called first to prepare the engines. It was decorum.

I tried to maintain my anger out of a sense of propriety. "What's the rush?"

He was having none of it. "We're leaving, that's all. The trip has been cancelled because of the ice."

I usually didn't ask. I'd stopped caring about a year before because my opinion on the subject counted for nothing. I said: "May I ask where we are going?"

"Bucksport, Maine," he replied, but he must have felt he owed me something for my trouble because he added one final piece of information. "The wheelsman on the icebreaker killed himself. I don't know where he found a hole in the ice to jump into, but he did. They're turning back with the body, so we're turning back, too."

The news went through me. It hollowed me out. When I could I stalked into the boiler room hunting for every ounce of steam I could find to turn the turbines faster.

The Cruel Sea, by Nicholas Monsarrat, includes a description of the sinking of the *Compass Rose*. The ship was a corvette that was torpedoed in the North Atlantic during *World War Two*. Survivors swam or clung to life rafts in the frigid water not knowing whether a rescue ship had been dispatched to save them. They had to swim on faith. As time wore on, the disheartened died — not from exhaustion itself, but because the pain of fighting to stay afloat was greater than their ability to hope. Once that happens in anyone's life, that person drowns. What is true of an individual's physical death is an accurate metaphor for the death of a soul.

I had read this novel sometime in my youth, but was never fully aware of the danger of drowning in a dry place. Until I witnessed it on an icefield off Newfoundland. It had happened to the wheelsman ... before he found the water. And it had happened to the day man and the captain God knows when. It was happening to me.

I never did sail to Corner Brook during the course of my career at sea. By evening the engines had pried the ship free of the heavy ice. We passed South then East and crossed a time zone.

At midnight, we advanced the clock.

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Antonio Machado (1875-1939) was one of the great Spanish modernists.

Eric Miller teaches at the University of Victoria. His second book of poetry, *In the Scaffolding*, appeared in Goose Lane Editions in 2005. He has translated Linneaeus and Sulzer, and written on figures such as Christopher Smart and Ann Radcliffe.

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